

# FATHOMLESS OCEAN

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PERIYAKULAM, TAMILNADU, INDIA

Title of the Book	:	<b>FATHOMLESS OCEAN</b>
Editors	:	Gomez Sophia U. Anamica
First impression	:	February 2019
Pages	:	174
Price	:	700
ISBN	:	978-93-86712-61-5
Printed at	:	Laser Point, Madurai-625 003.

### **Publisher**

Department of English  
 Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous)  
 Accredited With "A" Grade (3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle) by NAAC  
 DST - FIST College since 2015  
 Periyakulam-625601, Theni Dt, Tamil Nadu.  
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 (Affiliated to Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal-624102,  
 Tamilnadu.)

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- 9 A Study of Peripheral versus Internal Beauty with  
Special Reference to Marge Piercy's *Barbie Doll* 37  
**U. Anamica**
- 10 Gender Stereotypes and Fairy Tales : A Reading 42  
**Aleena Rosmin Abraham**
- 11 Impressions of A Light-Filled Mind: Radical Hope  
and Courage in Etty Hillesum's Diaries and Letters 48  
**Angeline Sorna**
- 12 Narrative Techniques in Meira Chand's *A Different  
Sky* 37  
**H.Rakhiba**
- 13 The Conquest of the Duo – Helen Keller and her  
Alma Mater 63  
**Jaseema Banu**
- 14 Similitude in Shakespeare's Portia and Esther in *The  
Bible* 70  
**J. Jaya Queenslin**
- 15 Women's Real Denotation of Life: A Critical  
Perspective in *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair 76  
**P. Selvarani**
- 16 A Study of the Female Psyche with Reference to  
Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Shirley  
Jackson's *The Possibility of Evil* 80  
**A. Monika**

## SIMILITUDE IN SHAKESPEARE'S PORTIA AND ESTHER IN *THE BIBLE*

J. JAYA QUEENSLIN

"Many women have done excellently,  
but you surpass them all...

Give her of the fruit of her hands  
and let her works praise her in the gates"

Proverbs 31: 29-31

"Similitude" – Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "the quality or state of being similar to something", "A comparison between two things" or "A person or thing resembling someone or something else". This paper deals with the similitude of two great women, Esther and Portia. Both the characters are the heroines of the particular book or play. Heroines are strong female characters who take daring actions to save or help other individuals throughout plays and stories. Here, Esther and Portia have similitude in their qualities. This paper deals with some similar qualities of Portia and Esther like beauty, piety, obedience and intelligence.

The Book of Esther was originally included in the writings of Hebrew scripture, and was incorporated into the historical books of the Greek Septuagint. The Book of Esther describes the Jewish heroine Esther, who saved the Jewish people in Persia from annihilation during the reign of King Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) of Persia, who ruled from 486 to 465 BC. As an historical character, Esther is the supreme heroine who delivers her nation from disaster. As a woman, she is that rare individual, a mixture of charm, strength and guile: a human being whose character is secure from the rot of wealth, prosperity and power. The Book of Esther describes lives of the Jewish Diaspora that stayed behind in Persia and did not return to Jerusalem during the Restoration.



"Shakespeare has no heroes, only heroines", said Ruskin. Yes, in the context of this saying, Portia does come out as a very witty and strong character in *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia is one of the most prominent of Shakespeare's heroines in his mature romantic comedies. Portia is one of Shakespeare's most revered heroines, and she embodies many heroic attributes throughout *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia's intelligence, sympathy, and courage are predominant character traits typically found in heroines. "The Portia who begins as a witty young woman turns into the princess of the Beautiful Mountain, dangerous and difficult of access, into the perfectly dutiful and affectionate wife, into a tomboy, into an allegory of Mercy, and ends as something not unlike her first self, only mature and more in command of every situation"

- (*Shakespeare's Early Comedies*, 184)

**Portia and Esther are the icons of unparalleled beauty.** It goes without saying that Esther had great personal beauty. Her dark, exotic features marked her out, and she was thus chosen as a candidate for the king's favour who, when he saw her for the first time must have been captivated by her physical charms. It's because of her beauty that Esther became an inmate of the palace, and when courageous Queen Vashti was deposed, Esther was chosen to succeed her.

"Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother; the girl was fair and beautiful....." (*Esther 2:7*) The lines of Byron can be fittingly applied to Esther:

"She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes." - *She walks in beauty* (1-4)

Portia is a rich, beautiful, and intelligent heiress of Belmont. Portia has been called by critics as one of the most perfectly developed female characters of Shakespeare. S. A. Brooke has called her, "the queen of beauty". Jessica calls her beautiful "past all expressing". She possesses



physical as well as the beauty of character. She is so beautiful that suitors come to woo her from distant lands like so many Jasons in search of the Golden Fleece. "Portia- the heroine of a romance story (who) is fair, noble, maiden (and) an only daughter who loves simply and unquestioningly".

- (*A Critical study of Shakespeare's Comedy*, 480)

"In Belmont is a lady richly left; and she is fair and, fairer than the word, of wondrous virtues: sometimes from her eyes I did receive fair speechless messages: Her name is Portia....." - *Great Books of the Western World* (Act- I, Scene I)

These unparalleled beauties, Portia and Esther had radiant inner beauty that manifested itself in piety towards their Creator. Esther, as depicted in the Bible, was a pious woman who demonstrated great belief, resolve, mercy, and courage combined with reasonable caution. Esther seeks the divine guidance in times of difficulty. "She prayed to the Lord God of Israel, and said: 'O my Lord, you only is our king; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, for my danger is in my hand,' (Esther 4:14: 3-4) Though she was the queen she ceased all the pride and luxuries of a queen and humbled herself before the Almighty. She pleads God for His blessings and presence to be guided in all her endeavors. "Then Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord. She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair". (Esther 4:14: 1-2)

Portia like Esther was pious and explained clearly the mercy of God through the famous speech given by her, about the quality of Mercy. Professor Harold Fisch argued this speech of Mercy was echoed in the words of Deuteronomy in the Bible. He argued that "the words of Deuteronomy- 32:2, "My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew; as the small rain upon the tender grass, and as the showers upon the herb," were echoed in the first words of the speech, "The quality of mercy is not strained / It droppeth as the gentle rain from



heaven / Upon the place beneath." (*The Song of Moses: Pastoral in Reverse*, 55) "A.J. Bryant's essay argues that Portia may be identified as "Christ's divine nature" in parallel to "Christ's physical nature" as represented to Antonio." (*A Critical study of Shakespeare's Comedy*, 486)

During the trial, Shylock asks Portia what could possibly make him want to be merciful. Portia replies that human beings should be merciful because God is merciful and mercy is an attribute of God himself and therefore greater than power, majesty, or law. She is so merciful towards everyone.

"But mercy is above this sceptred sway;  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice."

- *Great Books of the Western World* (Act IV Scene I)

The selected women also possess the quality of obedience. Portia also represents the obedient daughter, who complies with her father's wishes, even after his death. Yet she does so in a sneaky and in a certain way does get around the rules laid out by her father concerning the manner in which would choose a husband. *Portia is obedient* and loyal to her father even after his death, though, undeniably, she feels frustration and resentment, which she vents by insulting her suitors when they are out of earshot. Nevertheless, she honors her father's wishes even when the qualities of her suitors tempt her to use sabotage. This adorable obedience of Portia adds a gem in her tiara.

Esther was the model of obedience. An exemplar for her obedience is flamboyantly explained in the Bible in *Esther* 2:20 - "Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him". Though she was the Queen of Persia, she obeyed her guardian because she knew that doing so was for her benefit. Later, when Mordecai discovered a plot to exterminate all the Jewish people in the



kingdom, he went to Esther, telling her to step forward and save her people. She was reluctant at first, but Mordecai prompted her to go to the king saying, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this?" (*Esther* 4:14). Esther responds that after three days of fasting and praying she would go to the king and says, "If I perish, I perish." (*Esther* 4:16) Esther obeyed in the ordinary details of her life. With her parents dead, Esther could have told Mordecai that he couldn't tell her what to do because he wasn't her father. Instead, she submitted to his parental role and did what he told her – even after she moved into the palace (*Esther* 2:10-11). She obeyed Mordecai in the ordinary things, also when he came to her with something extraordinary (delivering her people from annihilation) she obeyed.

Courage and intelligence were the core qualities embedded in the characters chosen. Portia has great intellectual ability. She is a shrewd judge of human nature. Her remarks to Nerissa about her six suitors reveal a keen intellect and a true understanding. She shows wisdom and resourcefulness in carrying out her plan of appearing in the court of Venice, disguised as a lawyer. She arranges all the necessary details with an almost masculine self-confidence and practical common sense. Portia's arguments in court are strong and thought-provoking. She shows her wit and courage by disguising herself as a male lawyer and taking Antonio's side in court. Her challenges to Shylock are clever and ultimately she saves Antonio's life. The below given words vividly explain the versatility and audacity of Portia.

Tarry a little; there is something else.  
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;  
The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh.'  
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh;  
But, in the cutting it, if thou dost shed  
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods  
Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate  
Unto the state of Venice.

- *Great Books of the Western World* (Act IV Scene I)



Esther throws everything she has—her courage, her loyalty, her intelligence, her beauty—into the political effort to save her people. The combined wisdom of Mordecai and Esther's courage became the means of lightening the load of the Jews under Persian rule. Haman, the chief court favourite, was the Jews' enemy and the Old Testament's Adolf Hitler—and conceived a plan to massacre the Jews en bloc. Exhorted by Mordecai, Esther revealed her Jewish nationality to the king, and this courageous action brought about a complete reversal of the decree. Queen Esther astutely planned to kill the depraved Haman. Instead of giving a direct plea to the king, she called the king as well as Haman for the feast. On the second day, while the king was drinking wine and in the happiest mood, he asked Esther of her wish. Esther outwitted Haman and exposed his wickedness to the king, who ordered his men to put Haman to death. Thus Haman was executed, Mordecai was honoured by the king, and Esther's position as Queen was considerably strengthened by her acumen. Esther, by her wit and courage saved the Jewish people from destruction.

The characteristics similitude of Esther and Portia serve as a positive role model for women and men, both in the time the book was written and down through the centuries to the present day.

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